19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

on a low table. The pile of rice on the tray looks like a heap of snow. The curries or condiments are placed beside the tray in small cups. The members of the family usually eat together. If there are guests the women often wait, either to serve in case the supply needs replenishing, or because they are shy about eating with strangers.

In addition to attending to their domestic cares, the women take their place beside the men in the fields. It should not be forgotten, however, that the latter can cook and perform the work usually assigned to women more readily than men in the West can. In the field the women and girls assist in the sowing, planting, and transplanting of rice on the plains, as well as in the reaping, threshing, etc., doing their full share along with the men. They tend the cotton and vegetables and carry the greater part of the paddy to the storage-bins and from these to their homes. The only work I have seen men doing that I have never observed being done by women is plowing.

The women mingle in the village gatherings and take part in the wedding and funeral festivities, their share in the latter being specially prominent.[2] Their position in their own families depends largely on their personal character. If they possess strong personalities, they gain considerable prestige and exercise influence accordingly. The older they grow the more conservative they become, and not infrequently the opinions of a grandmother will keep a whole family from bettering its condition by engaging in some new occupation. The Karen grandmother holds the first place in the family at the "Bgha" feast, when all of the members are gathered together. She is then the "Bgha a' hko." This peculiar position of hers has been discussed in the chapter on Feasts to the "Bgha."[3] Its religious significance is remarkable and may be a relic of matriarchal government, which is still found in Tibet. But it does not appear to have any effect on the social position of the sex, except in so far as it prevents the younger members of the family, both men and women, from breaking with the religious and social traditions of their forefathers.

In the olden days three classes of people were condemned "to live without the camp." These were cohabiting couples who had not complied with the marriage rites, widows, and orphans. A couple whose union had been formed without the performance and

[2] See Chapter XX, p. 262.
[3] See Chapter XXIV, pp. 248, 249.

19: Marshall M-S (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

681 sanction of the recognized marriage ceremonies were ostracized to
684 the extent of having to live outside of the village stockade or, if
736 they belonged to a community living in a single village-house, they were required to occupy a room detached from the main building.
681 The two other classes of ostracized persons, namely, widows and
761 orphans, were supposed to have incurred the displeasure of their
774 "Bgha," and it was feared that their misfortune would become contagious if they were allowed to remain in the village. That is, the "Bgha" of other families would imitate the "Bgha" of the widows' and orphans' families in eating the "k'las" of other husbands and parents, thus depriving the village of more of its members. It was believed that this danger could be avoided by driving the bereft ones into the jungle to shift for themselves. The added risk of the future marriage of these baneful persons was taken into account. This was perhaps negligible in the case of the widows, but the orphans should not be allowed to grow up with other children to become in time eligible for marriage with them. Left to range through the jungle, such orphans, if they survived, generally developed a daring and resourcefulness that inspired the ordinary folk of the village with wonder. Their deeds came to be thought of
[741] as due to a supernatural power. In short, they were believed to be magicians.[1]

Family Relationships

595 In the chapter on Marriage Customs mention is made of the
587 general chastity of the Karen and of their monogamous marriages within the tribe. The rule is for a man to have one wife; but now and then a secondary wife or concubine, known as a "ma po tha," is supported. It may be that on account of the childlessness of the first wife the new connection has been entered into for the sake of offspring, or that the man has simply followed his own inclinations in the matter. Such unions are effected without the formality of marriage ceremonies and are not recognized by Karen society, being entirely irregular.

584 Westerners, accustomed as they are to doing their own courting, sometimes wonder how happy marriages can be effected in the case of young men and women who are strangers and have never met perhaps till they come together in the marriage chamber. We must remember, however, that with a people like the Karen the physical relationship is more significant than the spiritual. Senti-

[1] See Chapter XXVI, pp. 269-278.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

and a basket of grain sold for a basket of money. He has seen the people dig unhealthy yams and suffer from eating them. In the last three statements the elder is clearly showing the effects of a great scarcity of grain, both on the price one had to pay for food and on the people who were reduced to the necessity of eating bad food. His reference to fires, floods, plagues, and massacres seem intended to suggest the causes of some of the famines that have come under his observation. Notwithstanding the importance of the subject he is dealing with, the elder addresses no exhortation to his hearers, except by implication.

The precept on indolence is full of moralizing. It condemns laziness and enjoins hard work in order to obtain paddy. It teaches the people to do their work with cheerfulness and gladness, as also thoroughly and well. "We love happiness," says the precept, "and our greatest happiness is to clear our fields and build our houses. Everything is in the earth. Work hard with the hoe to dig it out, and one can buy drums and silver and other things. It is better to work for wealth than to obtain it by raids and forays." This saying overlooks neither the spiritual nor material rewards of labor.

The precept on helping the poor, as well as those on fornication and adultery, contain references to famine, indicating that periods of extreme dearth of food must have been of frequent occurrence among the Karen. Fornication and adultery are dreadful sins because, among other reasons, they produce bad crops and scarcity of game. In times of famine the rich should help the poor, but the obligation of the former to the latter seems to stop there, so far as the sayings of the elders go. The admonition to help the poor is as follows:

"Children and grandchildren, work, every one of you, and be prepared for a time of famine. Then, when a time of scarcity or famine comes, let not the rich and those who have all the rice and paddy reject the poor who have nothing, that you may not lose your honor and be abused, but may be honored and respected. When hard times come and there is famine amongst you, let the wealthy help those who have nothing with which to buy and who can not borrow."

In a similar vein the people are urged to care for widows and orphans lest other countries, hearing of their mistreatment of their helpless ones, shall abuse them and call them poverty-stricken. Even if there are rich men among them, others will not

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

peace gives a wide space; love of evil gives a narrow space. If we want evil, it is present even before all the water has run out of a vessel that has been upset."

The people were warned not to commit fornication or adultery. When they married they were to do so openly. They were told that if they were guilty of fornication, their sons and their daughters would die and the country would be defiled and destroyed on their account. The begetting of illegitimate children was declared to be displeasing to "Thi Hko Mü Xa," the Lord of heaven and earth, and to be the cause of irregularity of the rains, bad crops, failure of seeds and vegetables to germinate, disappointment in the hunt, poverty, and slavery. On the discovery of illicit relations between two of the villagers they were brought before the elders, who required the guilty persons to buy and kill a hog and each of them to dig a furrow in the ground with a leg of the animal. They were then to fill the furrows with the blood of the hog, after which they were to scratch the soil into little holes and mounds while repeating the following prayer: "Lord of heaven and earth, God of the mountains and hills. I have destroyed the productiveness of the country. Do not be angry with me, do not hate me; but have mercy on me and pity me. I now repair the mountains. I heal the hills and the streams with my hands. May there be no failure of crops, no unsuccessful labor, or unfortunate efforts in my country. Let them be dissipated on the distant horizon. Make the paddy fruitful and the rice abundant. Cause the vegetables to flourish. If we cultivate but little, may we obtain but little." When each of the guilty pair had completed this ceremonial, they said that they had made reparation and returned to their houses. In Shwegyin, however, such culprits were driven from the village and required to live outside.[1]

Among the Bwes it was customary to fine adulterers, unless they were single or widowed; but if a wife was involved, her paramour was compelled to pay a fine to the injured husband and take the woman as his wife, the former husband being considered divorced and free to marry again with the money he had received. In case a husband was found guilty of adultery, the woman concerned must pay a fine to the injured wife, who became free to contract another marriage.

If the crops were poor, the villagers suspected that it was due to secret sins of this sort and felt the need of making offerings to

[1] See pp. 192, 257.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

appease the Lord of heaven and earth and to find out the guilty persons.

On the subject of stealing the exhortation of the elders was not to steal, destroy, defraud, or act dishonestly. Such deeds are by no means secret. Even though unconfessed, they become manifest in the ordeal by water and in that of ascending a tree. The God of heaven sees. The Lord of the mountains and hills, "Thi Hko Mü Xa," sees. If one is hungry, one should work, should bend the back. If one wants fish, one should use the hand-net. If one desires game, let one repair to the jungle for it. Families are to be fed in this way, not by stealing or by running into debt.

A person who had been caught stealing might be let off, if it was his first offense and he restored the stolen property and promised to reform. If, however, he became a confirmed thief, he was sold into slavery. In some parts of the Toungoo district it was not uncommon for one guilty of stealing to pay the penalty with his life. If positive proof was lacking and there was doubt as to his guilt, the ordeal by water was resorted to.

Murder was, of course, utterly condemned in the sayings of the elders, for "man is not like the beasts. He has a Lord and Master. We are the children of Thi Hko, of Y'wa who created us. Therefore, do not kill one another." The murderer will be surrendered to the Lord of the lands and will be put to death. He can not escape. His body will be left naked in the fields, and the vultures will devour it. "These things," the elders declare, "have we seen with our own eyes, and we know them, and they have often happened among us." However, the circumstances under which a murder was committed were taken into account. A homicide at a drunken feast was considered an accident, for it was thought that the one guilty of the crime would not have committed it had he been sober. No cause for an action existed in such a case.

Men killed while taking part in a foray were to be redeemed, that is, a fine was to be paid for them, unless the leader had been excused from such payment in advance.[4] Likewise, the accidental death of a man during a trading, hunting, or other trip undertaken at the request of another, was chargeable to the latter, because otherwise it would not have occurred.

The recognized way of bringing to justice an offender who was accused of causing the death of another, was for the near relatives

[4] See p. 157.

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

586 In case the young man is dissatisfied with the union he has formed, the price to be paid by him is much larger, namely, three hundred rupees, one change of clothing, bracelets, earrings, and other jewelry. Because the man and his parents have the initiative and exercise the right of choice in effecting a marriage, the justice of the above arrangement is obvious.

684 I have been repeatedly assured that in the early days, when the Karen people lived unto themselves, moral lapses were uncommon among them, and that the lot of young persons found to be holding improper relations with each other was a hard one. Their sin was regarded not only as an offense against their household gods, the "Bgha," but also a crime against the community, inasmuch as it was supposed to cause sterility of the earth and, hence, loss of crops. The sinful ones were brought before the elders, who, having eaten two fowls that were cooked whole for them, required the couple to sacrifice a large animal, that is, a buffalo, an ox, a pig, or a goat. The blood of the slain creature was sprinkled on the ground "to cool it off" or, in other words, to remove the curse that rested upon it. The elders then resorted to extreme methods to shame the offenders, who were driven from the village, sometimes after having been stripped naked. As they were not allowed to mingle with the rest of the inhabitants perhaps for several years, they either went to some distant village to live, or built themselves a hut in the jungle.[11]

[11] On the subject of adultery and its relation to divorce among the Karen, see p. 161.